

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar

Prof. Funkhouser

5/2/07

Roth, "The Mysteries of Desire: A Discussion"

- A desire to A can provide a motive to B, where A and B are distinct actions. In such a case there is a transmission of motivation from a desire to A to a desire to B. But, how must A and B be related in order for this to happen? There must be some kind of rational connection between A and B. One form this can take is that B-ing is a means to A-ing. Roth then wonders about the role that value judgments play in such rationalizations.

- Mele interprets Davidson as holding that desiring does not entail a value judgment. But, Roth takes Mele to task here.

The anemic sense of justification Davidson has in mind, according to Mele, is simply that there's something to be said for the action from the agent's point of view. This something is that the action satisfies the agent's desire, where one may desire something that one does not value in any way, as when one has a yen to drink a can of paint. (276)

And Mele agrees that there are rationalizing explanations of action that do not involve any value judgments. But Roth disagrees.

I find this puzzling. Suppose I came across such bizarre behavior, and someone, noticing my perplexity, says that the fellow just wants to drink paint; his goal is just to drink paint. I would not react, "Ah, I see; now I understand what's going on." I would want to know, what on earth is he doing that for? (277)

But is Roth correct that the explanation offered is really so unsatisfying?

Roth also says:

Indeed, such talk seems to preclude understanding because in saying that he just wants to drink paint, it rules out a further end or purpose to behavior that is in itself bizarre. (278)

But, isn't this a helpful explanation *because* it rules out these alternatives?

- Roth also objects to Mele's cases in which intrinsic desires, without instrumental beliefs, supposedly provide reasons for action — the whistling example.

- Roth also objects to Mele's account of motivation encompassing attitudes. First, he argues that there can be motivational states that do not contribute to any trying. Roth's example is the desire to refrain from going to a party. Second, Roth argues that there are many cases, beyond the limited exceptions Mele allows, in which a desire provides no motivation. Here Roth presents the example of the Britney Spears, oops, I mean Brandi Sparrows, fan. He has desires to hang out with and get to know Brandi, but this provides him with no motivation (in his actual situation). But, Roth argues, on Mele's account it does turn out that this desire is a motivational state.

Nevertheless, this desire satisfies the conditions Mele takes to be necessary and sufficient for an attitude constituting motivation: it satisfies the subjunctive conditional mentioned above, in that *if* the attitude were to function effectively, it would lead the agent to try to act accordingly. (283)

Is Roth correct that this person is not motivated to hang out with Sparrows?

- Roth endorses *motivational contextualism*: "This is the claim that whether or not an attitude such as a desire constitutes motivation to A will depend on a host of factors concerning the agent and her circumstances." (284)

- Finally, Roth worries about the epistemology of motivational strength. If the strength of a desire cannot be known until after action has occurred, how can we rationally deliberate (in our own case) or predict behavior (in the case of another)?